

IV. Issues and Challenges in Montana Historic Preservation

Planning for the preservation of Montana's heritage resources is particularly critical at this juncture. Amidst a background of national and state economic uncertainty, Montana continues to undergo a transition from an economy primarily based on natural resource extraction to one that is increasingly dependent on service-based industries. Tourism, for example is now Montana's second largest industry after agriculture, out-stepping mining and timber. According to the *Montana Tourism & Recreation Strategic Plan 2003-2007*, Montana's heritage tourists in particular are "high revenue" tourists that spend the most money in the local economy. Meanwhile, the state budget for the next biennium must deal with a shortfall of between 200 and 300 million dollars and the prospect of program eliminations. Residential development, particularly in the west and southwest parts of the state, continues to see marked increases, while population in eastern Montana remains stable or is declining. Montana's cities in general are experiencing growth and are eclipsing federal and state government as the centers for the state's economic development. At the same time that state services are being cut back, local governments across the state must address infrastructure needs associated with shifting growth.

Within this milieu, interest statewide in the preservation and interpretation of our historic and prehistoric resources continues to be strong. As Montana experiences changes and uncertainty in its economy and life style, there is a perceived need to preserve our sense of place and the resources that help us to relate to and understand our past. New residents are interested in learning more about their adopted home and are often eager to contribute to local preservation efforts. Communities see tourism opportunities associated with cultural sites and are increasingly willing to incorporate historic preservation in area economic development plans. Local government officials, Chambers of Commerce, public land managers, economic development specialists and educators also see the value of working cooperatively with historic preservation advocates to bring more financial and human resources to a variety of planning and educational efforts.

The preservation community has often been at odds with other public and private activities that have seemingly discounted the value of heritage resources. Often, preservation concerns have been addressed as an afterthought or a luxury rather than as an integral part of the decision making process. Key to the success of preservation in the State of Montana in the future will be a greater understanding of the issues facing historic preservation and the recognition and incorporation of historic preservation concerns in wide-ranging public policy decisions. The formulation of public policy in the areas of land use planning, economic development, natural resource conservation, the provision of affordable housing, and other issues will benefit from the consideration of cultural resource properties and vice versa.

Based on public opinion, the primary issues and challenges facing historic preservation in Montana today are not unlike those identified five years ago. Three of the top four issues deemed most significant in surveys conducted in 2001 are the same as those previously identified in 1996: *availability of financial resources; local ability to preserve historical/cultural resources; and public awareness of culture/preservation issues* (see

Appendix A). To these widely recognized and highly ranked issues can be added a fourth based on comments received and input taken over the past five years: *tribal participation in historic preservation*. While additional issues exist, these four are highlighted below.

Financial Resources

SHPO easily receives ten inquiries per week, sometimes more, about the availability of funds to facilitate historic preservation. The majority of these come from private individuals who, in turn, are the most often disappointed to learn that neither historic preservation grants or incentives cater to homeowners. At the same time, potential eligible recipients – incoming producing properties, non-profit organizations, and public agencies – face increasing restrictions and/or competition for limited financial resources and are often forced to choose between using funds for historic preservation or for some other worthy purpose.

The lack of financial resources affects preservation at all levels. Federal agency heritage programs, largely funded and driven by undertakings, have little opportunity to initiate historic preservation projects on federal lands proactively. Local governments, many of which rely directly or indirectly on federal or state support, struggle with public needs and services seemingly more basic than historic preservation. At the state level, Montana's \$200 - 300 million budget shortfall for 2004-2005 almost ensures that no new programs will be developed and existing programs, including those related to historic preservation, will likely see cuts between 10 – 20%. Already one of the lowest state funded preservation offices in the nation, Montana SHPO will have fewer state dollars in contribution over the foreseeable future, necessitating putting more of its federal appropriation into funding core in-house programs and away from assistance to local preservation projects. In 2001, for example, SHPO was able to reinstate its re-grant program for "bricks-n-mortar" and community surveys on the basis of an increase in the federal allocation of the Historic Preservation Fund (HPF) to the states. This was continued in 2002 despite a 50% cutback in the increase. Now, with current projections of a further decline in the HPF distribution to the states, coupled with state budget cuts, cancellation of this program is almost certain.

Considered both an issue as well as a solution to other issues, base funding for historic preservation continues to be a primary challenge in Montana. Reliance on special funded projects, volunteerism, and philanthropy, while creating opportunities that would otherwise not exist, will not in and of itself address this issue.

Opportunity: The 57th Montana State Legislature passed into law effective January 1, 2002 a state tax credit for qualified rehabilitation of significant historic properties placed into preservation easements held by a non-profit organization for at least 29 years. Montana must identify organizations willing and able to hold these easements.

Opportunity: The recently enacted federal 2002 Farm Bill includes provisions for historic preservation such as funds for inventory, barn rehabilitation grants and for the protection of archaeological sites, although no dollars have yet to be appropriated.

Local Ability to Preserve

Multiple factors likely contribute to the recognition of the local ability to preserve historic/cultural resources as an important issue in Montana preservation. Not least among these is the knowledge that financial resources for historic preservation at the local level, generated directly or received through state and federal programs, are severely constrained (see above). Funding aside, however, other local considerations include pressures that compete with historic preservation such as urban sprawl, the general lack of available expertise, and the ineffectiveness of regulation in controlling local and private developments.

Despite the relatively small size and overall moderate growth rate of its towns and cities, Montana has not been immune to urban sprawl. The development of commercial and residential districts on the outskirts of the state's urban centers has, as elsewhere in the nation, resulted in the deterioration of historic central business districts and city residential neighborhoods. Downtown revitalization efforts have been successful in a number of communities, but nonetheless struggle to compete with the public's thirst for national retail and restaurant chains that refuse to accommodate historic Mainstreet space. Meanwhile, subdivisions spread into surrounding agricultural landscapes and neighboring small communities are claimed and refashioned into satellite bedroom communities. The rural counterpart to sprawl, perhaps, is the ongoing loss of working ranches to out-of-state buyers more interested in land than land use. While often sensitive to wildlife and the scenic environment, historic properties on these ranches have not fared as well nor have the small communities reliant on the business that these ranches once supported.

Local communities and private preservation-minded individuals alike struggle in the face of these and other pressures. Even when an interest to preserve exists, knowledge is limited, help short-handed, and legal recourse generally non-existent. SHPO responds to numerous phone calls and can provide literature but seldom has the means or opportunity to make on-site visits. Local preservation organizations are small and generally focused on a single resource. The Montana Preservation Alliance, the statewide non-profit, has until recently not had the infrastructure to organize and take on more than one or two issues at a time. The fifteen communities (including some counties) participating in the federally funded and SHPO administered Certified Local Government (CLG) program fare better than others with resources and assistance provided through local preservation officers. Among these, however, design review procedures are still limited. State law also provides for the county review of the impact of subdivision development but with few notable exceptions, especially Gallatin and Madison counties, these typically do not include formal consideration of impacts to historic and prehistoric sites. Current policy for state permitting under the Montana Environmental Policy Act offers little more oversight of local projects with no requirements to collect new information or involve cultural resource professionals in the assessments of impact.

Opportunity: The Montana Preservation Alliance has hired a full-time staff person for the first time in 2002.

Public Awareness

Public awareness of culture/historic preservation issues was cited as the most significant factor affecting historic preservation in 1996 and also ranked second in 2001. Further, when asked which SHPO program merited additional funding - should such funding become available - respondents identified *Heritage Education and Outreach* second only to Matching Grants for Surveys and Bricks n' Mortar Projects, a financial resource. As noted in the 1997 Plan: "There is a strong relationship with public awareness and the commitment of dollars to preservation activities. As public awareness increases regarding the importance of preservation, it is likely that public policy decisions will increasingly favor the commitment of resources in support of historic resources" (*Working Together*, pg. 19). The following, from the 1997 Plan, also still applies:

"Public awareness of the value of our historic resources has been increasing over time. The incorporation of historic sites in state and local tourism promotion efforts is a good example of how public perceptions have changed. Increasingly, cities and towns are considering historic properties in land use planning issues. For example, communities often create special historic zones that encourage revitalization, mixed uses and architectural design standards for designated neighborhoods and commercial districts. Generally, Montanans are aware of the importance of documenting and preserving local history. Yet, public policy decisions regarding community and economic development, public infrastructure, housing and general land use are still often made without consideration of impacts on heritage properties. Local historical societies, preservation professionals and state preservation officials are often not consulted in the planning stages of project development. Rather preservationists often find themselves in a last ditch effort to save a site. The risk is that the preservation community, by being involved so late, can be characterized as obstructionist and anti-progressive. Educational programs which increase awareness among the public and their elected officials would be very beneficial in addressing this problem." (*Working Together*, 1997)

We must also confront the perception that preserving historic properties is too expensive or restrictive when measured against benefits. Property owners seeking advice and assistance might feel overwhelmed by what they view as unnecessary paperwork, extravagant expense or complicated processes. In some cases, they may be right. Information about more inexpensive construction materials which can be substituted to achieve the same goal, for example, would likely result in property owners being more willing to undertake restoration projects. Landowners who can continue to use their land while preserving archaeological and historical sites will likely be more cooperative.

Opportunity: The Montana SHPO has upgraded its website to include additional online information and resources: www.his.state.mt.us

Opportunity: 2002 promises to be the "Year of the Barn," with complementing initiatives including the Smithsonian/National Trust for Historic Preservation *Barn Again!* traveling exhibit, a Montana Barn Preservation poster, and a program for adding and recognizing barns in the state inventory.

Tribal Involvement

Although not identified as a discrete issue in the 1997 Plan, the importance of tribal involvement in historic preservation in Montana was nonetheless recognized both in that Plan and the comments it received (i.e., *Working Together*, Appendix B). Events since 1997 have only served to reinforce this perception. Not least among these is the establishment and staffing of the NPS-approved Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) on the Flathead Indian Reservation in portions of Lake, Flathead, Missoula, and Sanders counties in western Montana. Empowered to assume most of the duties and responsibilities of SHPO within the boundaries of the reservation, the CSKT THPO has also formalized tribal consultation for off-reservation resources of concern to these tribes, for example with regards to developments at Travelers Rest NHL near Lolo. The first of its kind in Montana, the CSKT THPO sets an example for development of future Montana THPOs, as is presently pending for both the Northern Cheyenne and Rocky Boys reservations.

Tribal lands within Montana's seven reservations make up nearly 6% of the state, equal in size to those owned by the state. While a significant factor in its own right, tribal concerns are not limited to these reservations. They often extend to tribal territories or alternatively to specific places or resource types. Different tribes approach tribal consultation and involvement in different ways – as with any entity, there is no single "Indian viewpoint." Important places may include rock art sites, fasting places, graves, medicinal plant gathering areas, the location of specific events (e.g. the Baker Massacre site), or much larger landscapes such as the Sweet Grass Hills or the Badger-Two Medicine drainages, the latter of which is being considered for formal nomination to the National Register of Historic Places by the Forest Service. Many of these traditional cultural properties, both large and small, are known only to the tribes and therefore known only through involvement of the tribes in the preservation planning process.

Montana's tribes played a primary role in passage of the Montana Human Skeletal Remains and Burial Act (1991) and more recently the Montana Repatriation Act (2001), the first state repatriation law of its kind. The discovery and disposition of human remains and associated funerary objects is a primary issue for all Montana tribes. Other issues include vandalism, the impacts of archaeological excavation, and poor land management practices. Discussions with tribal cultural representatives indicate that enforcement of existing law and public education are two important preservation efforts they want SHPO to lead. Many individuals – from elders to tribal college professors to tribal resource employees – also expressed interest in more field training and awareness of archaeological methods and techniques. Recognizing that prehistoric archaeological sites are Indian history, they not only want to monitor archaeologists but also be better able to monitor other tribal programs that they feel bypass preservation law and tribal culture committees. In general, our discussions indicate that tribes want to be involved in historic preservation. The challenge is to facilitate their participation.

Opportunity: Two additional reservations, Rocky Boys (Chippewa-Cree) and Northern Cheyenne, have THPO applications pending in 2002.

Other Issues

Other issues ranked significant by a majority of respondents to questionnaires (7 or higher on a scale of 1 to 10) include: *shifts in land use and settlement patterns; loss of culture/traditions due to passing generations; vandalism and/or neglect of historic resources; and the legal framework for protection of cultural resources on private land.*

Issues that ranked the lowest, both in 1996 and in 2001, included: information age communication changes; housing affordability and accessibility; baby-boomer attitudes about historic preservation; and shifts from industry/agriculture to a service based economy. While no issues came close to being ranked "insignificant" (value = 1), these four issues, adjusting for score inflation, could be considered weak or, at best, neutral.